Compelling Reasons That Keep Women In Abusive Relationships

The one question our culture generally asks of victims/survivors of domestic abuse is: "Why do/did you stay in an abusive relationship?" Sometimes the question is meant as an honest inquiry, though at other times it is spoken with an undercurrent of hostility or disbelief, (e.g.: "It couldn't have been that bad, you must have liked it," or "If you really wanted to leave, you would have.") This victim-blaming attitude is extremely counter-productive. Domestic violence is always the responsibility of the abuser, and it is also important to remember that leaving the relationship does not necessarily end the abuse (many abusers escalate their violence when the victim attempts to leave).

The following list, adapted from a publication of the Domestic Abuse Project (www.domesticabuseproject.org), is a composite of views collected from their women support groups over a period of several years. These women offered many answers to the question: "What keeps women in abusive relationships?"

Fear of Partner's Actions:
- He will threaten to leave me.
- He said he would "hunt me down and kill me."
- He will kidnap the children and disappear.
- He will spread horrible rumors about me.
- I will never be safe, I might as well live with him.
- She will "out" me at work or to my family. (if victim is gay or lesbian)

Effects of Abuse:
- Depression
- Feelings of immobility
- Can't face making decisions
- I am so used to my life being this way.
- I have no real options or choices.

Roles the Culture Forces upon Women:

Guilt:
- I will ruin his life if I leave.
- She will lose her job if I report this.
- He will start drinking again.
- I will disappoint my family.
- I have to take care of him.

Economic Dependence:
- He has all the money
- I have never had a good job, how will I care for kids alone?
- Better to be beaten up at home than to be on the street
• I would rather die than be on welfare.

**Dependence on Traditional Gender Roles:**
• I am afraid to be on my own, who will protect me?
• I fear that I will never be in a relationship again.
• He gives me a sense of security
• I don’t want to be a divorced woman.

**The Children:**
• My children will blame me and resent me.
• My children need a father.
• Children need a “real family”.
• Unwilling to give up the “house with a white picket fence, 2.2 children” dream.
• He will steal the children.
• He will turn the children against me.
• Sons need male role models.
• She is the biological mother; I have no legal rights.

**Isolation:**
• He doesn’t let me out of the house; I don’t even have any friends to call for help.
• If I *ever* tell *anyone* about this, he will kill me.
• My sister said I couldn’t come stay with her anymore, after the last time….
• He said he would teach Helen a lesson if I went over there again.

**Personal History:**
• My father beat my mom - it just goes with being in a relationship.
• Getting hit isn’t the worst thing that can happen in a family—I know of worse things…

**Love and Hope:**
• I keep hoping that he will change.
• I believe him when he keep saying that it will never happen again.
• I don’t want to give up the good times.
• She promised she would go to therapy.
• Sex and intimacy
• My marriage vows
• My religion
• I love him.

**Note:** This list is not necessarily comprehensive, and not all of these reasons are found in each case, but a combination of some of them can usually be found and may be compelling enough to keep a woman in the relationship.